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Speeches Honoring Abraham Lincoln

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The Education of Abraham Lincoln.

Only three score and five years have elapsed since Lincoln's death and yet in this brief time more books have been written about him than have been written about any other person in history outside of biblical characters. Mr. Louis A. Warren of Fort Wayne, Indiana, a leading authority on the childhood, youth, and early manhood of Lincoln, has a collection now numbering 3327 volumes all bearing directly on the life of Lincoln. In addition to the book collection, Mr. Warren's library includes 3000 magazine articles.

For many years after Lincoln's death, the popular view as exhibited in scores of biographies and countless magazine and newspaper articles pictured Lincoln as an unfortunate youth of dubious parentage, destined to long years of poverty and a paucity of educational advantages. This old-time view was very definitely wrong. Lincoln was a most fortunate child. He was well born. His father far from being a shiftless, wandering, ne'er-do-well, was a typical pioneer of substantial quality. He could do all kinds of pioneer farm work, was an excellent carpenter, and an expert cabinet-maker. Lincoln's mother, Nancy Hanks, was a woman of parts. She had mental and moral strength and character. She was a good mother in every sense of the term and until her death when Abraham was nine, exerted incalculable influence on the growing lad. The boy was fortunate a little later in the coming of a stepmother, Sally Bush Johnston, who gave him good care and affection, and contributed her full share in making a real home.

Lincoln was fortunate in other ways. He was born in Kentucky, a state of historic lore and striking natural attractions and advantages. As a little boy in Kentucky, Lincoln heard stories of Daniel Boone, Simon Kenton, James Harrod, and George Rogers Clark. He was made familiar with the Indian traditions of the state. Stories of the "warriors trail" and "the dark and bloody ground" became a part of his youth. When Thomas Lincoln, Abraham's father, was ten years old, his own father, another Abraham Lincoln, was shot down at his side by an Indian. During the Revolutionary War, more than fifty pitched battles between whites and Indians were fought in what is now the state of Kentucky. In that region there were more than fifty block houses and forts. In that part of Hardin County, now Larue County, where Lincoln lived during his first seven years, there was plenty of nature to the square mile. Only two hundred feet from the log cabin where Lincoln was born February 12, 1809, is a famous spring that provided excellent drinking water then and just as good now. About two hundred and fifty feet from this same log cabin was standing a famous white oak tree. This tree is still standing and is the best specimen of white oak the writer has seen.

When Lincoln was two years old, the family including his father and mother and sister, Sarah, who was four, moved to the Knob Creek farm, about ten miles from his first home. This farm was on the road from Hodgenville to Bardestown, Louisville and Lexington. It was a main highway of human travel and offered many advantages to the little boy of five, six, and seven years. Knob Creek runs through this farm and afforded many a delight to the lad. On one side of the creek is a high hill and from the creekbed, limestone fossils may still be picked up by the bushel. There was a swimming hole, or rather many swimming holes, very safe as the water was shallow.

During the last two years of the Lincoln residence at the Knob Creek farm, Abraham went to school for about eight weeks each winter. The two schoolmasters, Zachariah Riney and Caleb Hazel, were men of maturity and gave the boy a start in some things worth while.

The family moved to Indiana when Lincoln was seven and remained in one locality for fourteen years until he was twenty-one. Southern Indiana at that time was a region of great forests of magnificent trees,--ash, beech, elm, hackberry, hickory, maple, sweet gum, sycamore, walnut, willow, white oak, and many others. On the Indiana Lincoln farm there were at least thirty different species of trees and it is altogether likely that Lincoln was familiar with fifty different species. In Lincoln's youth, many kinds of wild animals roamed the forests of southern Indiana,--deer, bear, opossum, panther, raccoon, skunk, squirrel, wild cat, wolf. Wild fowl was plentiful,--grouse, pigeons, quail, ducks, geese, and turkeys.

From the arrival of the Lincoln family in Indiana when Abraham was seven years old, the boy had no more formal schooling until he was eleven. From the age of eleven he went to school a few weeks during each of three winters to three new schoolmasters, Andrew Crawford, James Swaney, and Azel W. Dorsey. Dorsey was the last of Lincoln's schoolmasters and the ablest. In the Kentucky and Indiana schools the boy learned, among other things, to spell, to read, to write, and "to figure to the rule of three."

Lincoln in his youth was a reader. Mr. Warren gives a list of twenty-four books that were probably read by Lincoln before he moved to Illinois. Mr. Warren is of the opinion that eight of these books exerted decided influence on Lincoln: The Bible, Dilworth's Speller, Aesop's Fables, Weems's Washington, Ramsay's Washington, Pike's Arithmetic, Pilgrim's Progress, and Murray's English Reader.

When Lincoln was eleven, the family consisted of eight individuals all living in one small log house. The father, Thomas Lincoln, was forty-four years of age; the stepmother was thirty-two; a cousin, Dennis Hanks, twenty-one; a sister, Sarah, and a stepsister, Elizabeth Johnston, were each thirteen; another stepsister was nine, and the youngest Johnston child was five. Daily contact with this group ranging in age from five to forty-four became a part of Abe's education. During Lincoln's youth in southern Indiana, that part of the state was peopled with a splendid pioneer population, in large part directly from Kentucky and Virginia. Social contact with vigorous personalities in the vicinity of the Lincoln home was an educational factor of immeasurable influence.

Sorrow and unhappiness were in the list of formative influences. Lincoln's mother died when he was nine, Sarah, his only sister, when he was nineteen, and at twenty-six he lost his sweetheart, Anne Rutledge. For fifteen years after 1832, he was harassed with debt. Grief and worry must be included among the significant factors in Lincoln's development.

The boy and youth had observational familiarity with carpentry and cabinet-making. There are many specimens of his father's skillful cabinet work still in existence. Abraham began wielding an ax at a very early age and was familiar with all the ordinary kinds of farm work. He knew the farm animals, the horse, the ox, the sheep, the hog. He could split rails and helped to build log houses. At the age of seventeen, he worked for several months in the fall and winter on a ferryboat on the Ohio, only fourteen or fifteen miles from his home. At this time the Ohio was the highway from the east to points south and west, and Lincoln became familiar with the great human current then moving westward. Two years later, at the age of nineteen, Lincoln and Allen Gentry took a flatboat of produce down the Ohio and Mississippi to New Orleans. This experience may have been equal to a semester or a year of modern college training to this youth of unusually inquiring mind. Three years later, at the age of twenty-two, Lincoln and two others conducted another flatboat trip from a point on the Sangamon River in Illinois down to the Mississippi and on to New Orleans again.

At nineteen, Lincoln stood six feet, four inches tall, weighed about one hundred eighty-five pounds, and was possessed of great physical strength. His hair was coarse and black, his eyes were gray, his hands were large and well shaped, and above all, he possessed a brain of unusual size with large capacity for mental work.

When Lincoln was twenty-one, the entire family, or rather three families totaling thirteen persons, moved by ox-team to Macon County, Illinois. After residing a year ten miles from Decatur, County seat of Macon County, Lincoln at the age of twenty-two probably paddled down the Sangamon River in a canoe, and finally stopped at New Salem, a little hamlet of a hundred souls where he was destined to remain six years. During the six years at New Salem, Lincoln had the benefit of many new contacts and experiences. For a time he clerked in a store. Then he became a partner in a little store with a man named Berry, who presently faded out of the picture and left Lincoln with a small dwindling business and an assortment of debts that hung about his neck like a millstone for fifteen years. At the age of twenty-three, he enlisted in the Blackhawk War and was elected captain of a military company. On his return from the campaign against the Indians, in which he saw no fighting Indians but plenty of fighting mosquitoes, he became a candidate for the Legislature of Illinois. He was defeated and this disappointment must be added to the sum total of his formative experiences. At the age of twenty-five he was again a candidate and won, as he did successively when he was twenty-seven, twenty-nine, and thirty-one. At New Salem, Lincoln studied surveying, practiced the art, and established a reputation as an excellent surveyor. Under a man named Mentor Graham, he studied grammar and enjoyed it. He also studied Euclid and liked that. He was postmaster at New Salem and this gave him contact with the federal government.

For twenty-eight years (one half his life), seven in Kentucky, fourteen in Indiana, and seven more in Illinois, Lincoln lived in log houses, and twenty-two years of the twenty-eight he lived on farms. During the last six years of this period he resided in a little hamlet that was decidedly rural. For another twenty-eight years until Lincoln's death at the age of fifty-six, he lived in two cities, Springfield, the capital of Illinois, and Washington, the capital of the United States.

While at New Salem, Lincoln studied law. In 1837 he went to Springfield to begin the practice of law with Major James Stuart. His second law partner, Judge Stephen Logan with whom he became associated in 1841, was a man of quite different type. Lincoln established a third and final partnership with William H. Herndon in 1844 with himself as senior partner. This partnership continued until Lincoln left Springfield for Washington in 1861, and the sign "Lincoln and Herndon" hung over their law office until Lincoln's death in 1865.

During Lincoln's four terms in the Illinois Legislature he was given plenty of opportunity to match strength and skill with a very considerable group of able men and he found that he was their equal. At the age of twenty-eight when he moved to Springfield to begin the practice of law, he was confident of his power. Although there were a dozen men in Springfield destined to achieve state and national distinction, several of them older and more experienced, Lincoln, at the age of twenty-eight knew he was their equal or superior in capacity for logical and sustained thinking.

From 1847 to 1849, Lincoln was a member of Congress. On his return to Springfield in the latter year, he entered busily upon the practice of law in a rather wholesale way. He established contacts in all of the fourteen county seats of the eighth judicial circuit and became a sort of expert associate counsel with a considerable group of lawyers all over this circuit. Often he practiced outside of the eighth circuit. As a trial lawyer, he was particularly skillful. He took 175 cases altogether to the Supreme Court of Illinois and won a majority of all the cases in which he was associate counsel and also a majority of cases that he tried on behalf of his own law office in Springfield.

From the age of twenty-three, Lincoln was an active, practical politician. It should also be mentioned that after his residence began in Springfield, he had a considerable amount of newspaper editorial experience in that city as he contributed numerous articles to the press. During the years in Springfield, he was an omnivorous newspaper reader. Lincoln and Herndon read regularly a number of papers that represented different sections of the United States. Anyone who does as much newspaper reading now with a special purpose as did Lincoln at Springfield may properly be called a research student.

All of the above contacts were truly a part of Lincoln's education. His four terms in the legislature, his numerous contests in law courts, the two years in Congress, his political activities, the newspaper editorials, his many public utterances all became a part of the man and help to explain the superb equipment that was his when he was called to the task of saving the Union during the four dreadful, stormy years of civil conflict. Work, mental play, humor, nature, intimate contact with folks, all sorts of folks, specialized reading, much practice in public utterance, frequent writing, all played their part in the development of the boy who wrote,

"Abraham Lincoln his hand and pen
He will be good but God knows when"

and the man who at fifty-two said in his first inaugural,

"I am loathe to close. We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battle-field and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature."

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D. T. Madsen



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